Hope in Saint-Roch

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In 2006, I was invited to Quebec City to participate in *Habiter*, an exhibition that took as its theme the Saint-Roch neighbourhood of the city. This neighbourhood constitutes the working-class heart of the city and is markedly multi-ethnic relative to the rest of the city. Its history is fraught with poverty and gang violence. The largest church in the city, Saint-Roch Church, anchors the neighbourhood. It was constructed between 1914 and 1923 on the site of two previous churches.

I came to Quebec City as an outsider, having visited the city twice before as a tourist. These previous visits were spent in the older sections of the city. As I walked around Saint-Roch, I was struck by how different it was from the museum-like setting of Old Quebec with its many tourist haunts and high-end restaurants. Saint-Roch is a neighbourhood where its inhabitants live, work, and socialize. But I could see many signs of change gripping the neighbourhood. Designer fashion stores were opening up and buildings were being upgraded and converted into expensive lofts.

Notably, there was an earlier experiment in the 1970s to “reclaim” several blocks of Rue Saint-Joseph, the main street of Saint-Roch, by encasing it in under a roof that connects it to the railway station. The “mall” extended as far as the side of the magnificent Saint-Roch Church. In 2000, two-thirds of the roof structure covering Rue Saint-Joseph was torn down. The result was the rehabilitation of open space on all sides of Saint-Roch Church. To me, the mall had clearly been a class-laced exercise in capitalist territorialization, a reclamation that had little to do with any redress of the social maladies that may have afflicted the area. The experiment failed because the malled section created an atmosphere that reduced the previous richness of activity on Rue Saint-Joseph to a singularity—that of a highly regulated shopping concourse.

Though lesser in scale than the phenomena of wholesale displacements of cities and nations, displacement through gentrification is another problem induced by disruptions of social networks. The social identity of local distinctions, such as the characteristics of a particular neighbourhood, is often predicated on the identification between
insiders and outsiders and not simply the local social networks that one participates in. A neighbourhood is also a social perception and, therefore, a subjective process of categorization and determination. Change occurring in a neighbourhood cannot be reduced to an Arcadian “good” and a present-day “bad.” Neighbourhoods are always changing and indeed need to accommodate to change in order to sustain their character. After all, the world never ceases to change in terms of global flows of bodies and capital.

Gentrification involves binary terms of upgrading and downgrading, settlement and unsettlement, in terms of the influx to a place by an upwardly mobile population and the outflow of the economically disadvantaged population. Gentrification is a complicated term involving more than the exchange or replacement of one population by another population. It can also be supplementary to that which makes a neighbourhood distinctive in terms of the routines and habits established within that space. But such supplementation must somehow be squared with the dehumanized and abstract values of commodity exchange by which gentrification is driven.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard urges architects to base their work on the experiences it will engender rather than on abstract rationales that may or may not affect viewers and users of architecture. He starts with the premise that the psyche is a place, and the house is an extension of that place. Both the house and the consciousness house memories. He uses the term *topoanalysis* as a way to theorize the topography of the self. Such an analysis will always lead to an understanding of place because the topography of the self is projected onto our physical environment:

To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms: one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced. For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates.¹

Bachelard’s theory of topoanalysis and its application to the space of the home could be productive in considering actual neighbourhoods and those structures and habits constituting them.

As I think about what is taking place in the Saint-Roch district of Quebec City, I cannot help but think about what is happening from where I write this text. Vancouver is a place undergoing massive change on a citywide scale. The change is traumatic and involves great injury to many people. Rue Saint-Joseph recalls in me Hastings Street
in Vancouver at the time of my childhood. There are many parallels between the Rue Saint-Joseph of today and the Hastings Street of the 1960s. Both streets were lively thoroughfares for the working and immigrant classes of their respective cities.

While Rue Saint-Joseph has undergone sensitive redevelopment as a result of enlightened civic policy, Hastings Street has become a hellish enclave for the poorest and most physically vulnerable of the city. Hastings Street is located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver in walking proximity to Gastown, a tourist haunt. This is similar to Saint-Roch’s proximity to Quebec City’s tourist district.

Today, in spite of its problems, Hastings Street is considered Vancouver’s next ingénue neighbourhood. As the 2010 Winter Olympics loom, the Downtown Eastside has become the site of ruthless redevelopment. The perceived problems afflicting the neighbourhood are in the process of being physically swept away, with mass arrests and evictions. But the problems of poverty and drug and alcohol addiction are only being dealt with cosmetically, in order to save the city’s face when Olympics visitors begin to arrive.

The Downtown Eastside has been a source of much political anxiety over the last twenty years, as the City of Vancouver has become an increasingly sought-after tourist and residential destination. The Woodward’s Building, a highly important historical structure built in 1903 and located in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, was mostly demolished in November 2006. The site is now a bastion of the developers. An empty lot exists where the building once stood. Building cranes and construction crews are working busily to construct a new face for the Downtown Eastside, one which makes no reference to the inhabitants that will be soon be displaced.

In Saint-Roch, social displacement has taken place but in a much different way. Historical buildings are not the exclusive fiefdoms of the developers to decide whether to allow them to remain standing or not. The problems addressed in Saint-Roch had more to do with questions about how change could be accommodated in the context of an established neighbourhood. Unlike in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, the citizens of Saint-Roch are recognized and listened to. During my recent visit to Saint-Roch, I could see that the correct questions were being feasibly answered. This gave me much hope in terms of how cities today can negotiate the pressures of development with the history embedded in them both materially and psychically.

The role of memory in relation to the experience of space is crucial to consider in any discussion of urban change and gentrification. For it
is memory that has the ability to activate a space long after change has occurred. Memory has as much to do with the past as it does the future. As Bachelard claims in *Dialectic of Duration*:

> What makes the social framework of memory is not just history lessons but far more the will to a social future. All social thought is pulled towards the future. All forms of the past must, if they are to give us truly social thoughts, be translated into the language of the human future.²

My experience of Saint-Roch is tied to my memories of Hastings Street. I can see the difference between what is in Saint-Roch and what failed to be in Hastings Street. That said, Saint-Roch could very quickly have turned into a failure, but the right decisions were made at the right time to stop problems from worsening. I think it is in the nature of neighbourhoods to evoke associations with other neighbourhoods. The associations are made across time and space, and across hope and despair. Such is the delicate constitution of neighbourhoods.

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